

The international position of the minorities after the World War I

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Abstract

The minority issues in the era of creation of the nations and nationalism in Europe during the XIX century, directly affected the existence of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the minority problems in Southeastern Europe were an indirect generator of the crucial issues within the international concert. Observed from the aspect of the religious protectorate, these issues inspired the Russian-Turkish military clashes and started the wave of national uprisings among the Balkan peoples, which culminated during the Balkan wars. The struggle for primacy over the Christian population within the Ottoman Empire also affected the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Russian Empire. In a certain moment, even France demonstrated its interest, becoming not only a strategic partner of the Ottomans and protector of the Orthodox Christian population on the Balkan during the period from the end of the Crimean War in 1856 until the outbreak of the Great Eastern crisis. At the 1919 international conference in Paris, a more serious, though unsuccessful attempt was made to protect minorities from possible tortures and injustices of any kind. In fact, we can safely conclude that the purpose of establishing the Corps Minority Issues within the Versailles system was not contained in the intention to resolve minority problems, but to construct appropriate ways that would encourage intervention. This approach, both politically and from a legal, and, of course, from a psychological point of view, represented a very sensitive area, which often resulted in a collision with the individual interests of the states, and at the same time threatened to disrupt the already established international relations. It is very obvious that the system of minority issues after the war was limited exceptionally to the weaker countries, and especially treated those countries which were defeated in the same war. In no existing sense this system could be implemented in the internal law of all the states-members of the League of Nations. Therefore, the international problematization of the issues from the minority corpus slipping through its historical progress, entering the phase when they culminated in the concentration camps, or, in the slightly better version, in the emigration in the countries of the new world.

Keywords: Nations, Nationalism, minority rights, Southeastern Europe.

1. Introduction

The minority issues in the era of creation of the nations and nationalism in Europe during the XIX century, directly affected the existence of the Ottoman Empire. In fact, the minority problems in Southeastern Europe were an indirect generator of the crucial issues within the international concert. Observed from the aspect of the religious protectorate, these issues inspired the Russian-Turkish military clashes and started the wave of national uprisings among the Balkan peoples, which culminated during the Balkan wars. The struggle for primacy over the Christian population within the Ottoman Empire also affected the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the Russian Empire. In a certain moment, even France demonstrated its interest, becoming not only a strategic partner of the Ottomans and protector of the Orthodox Christian population on the Balkan during the period from the end of the Crimean War in 1856 until the outbreak of the Great Eastern crisis.

Basically, the minorities always existed, although their question started to be treated as a political issue at the end of the XVIII century. "According to their origins, in the theory the minorities are divided on three basic groups:

- a) "autochthonous" minorities, which historically lived on one territory as remains from the migrations of other tribes or nations. For them is also used the term "territorial minorities" because of their connection with a certain territory;
- b) "non-autochthonous" or non-territorial minorities, which appeared with the migration movements because of religious, political or economic reasons. This process still happens to the present times;
- c) "new autochthonous" minorities which appear in the contemporary processes of ethnic segmentation and the revival of some already forgotten languages and cultures, which become identification elements for certain groups."¹⁸

The origins of the international protection of the minorities can be found in the attempts for prevention and patronage of the great European powers over the Christian population in the Ottoman Empire. This protection was mainly consisted in the system of capitulations, i.e. had a humanitarian character. As we mentioned before, the first treaty which was referring to the protection of the Orthodox population in the borders of the Ottoman Empire was signed between the Sublime Porte and the Russian Empire. That was the famous Treaty of Küçük Kaynarca, signed in 1774. According to this treaty, Tsarist Russia got the right to protect the entire Orthodox population within the Ottoman Empire, same as when the western European countries got the protection over the Holy places with the Sultan's firman from 1620.¹⁹ In any case, the Pandora's box from which among the numerous other issues came out the minority issues as well, was opened after the French bourgeoisie revolution and during the period of the Napoleon's wars, when the universal idea of *Liberté, Egalité & Fraternité* (*Freedom, Equality and Brotherhood*) – inspired the consciousness about the existence of human rights, which in the following period generated its energy into the creation of the national homogenous countries on the European ground. Therefore, these issues directly affected the national Slavic groups on the Balkan, which within the two Empires at the time were minorities. In the following historical circles, the genesis of the Eastern question can also be found in the tendency of the great European powers for the division of the great Ottoman heritage on the Balkan. In a great amount, the idea for Pan-Slavism, whose inspirer was the high policy of tsarist Russia, was also aimed towards the Balkan possessions which were inhabited by different Slavic ethno-national groups, which represented the perfect reason for its political interest's vis a vis the interests of Habsburg and Constantinople. In any case, observed chronologically, the process of creation of the national countries on the Balkan begun on the Conference in London on 3rd of February 1830, with the creation of the national monarchy of Greece. As a main condition for the recognition of the Greek independency by the Great powers, was the protection of the religious minorities. On the demand made by France in the protocol of the London Conference from 3rd of August 1830, the three Great powers-protectors of Greece, have set the political organization of the new Greek country and in it were projected certain guarantees for protection of the Catholic minority, to which was secured the right of free expression of religion, the full freedom of consciousness and the equality in the civil and political rights. This at the same time was the first time to be expressed the protection of minorities as a condition for recognizing of an independent country.²⁰

¹⁸В. Ортаковски, *Меѓународната положба на малцинствата*, Скопје, 1996. p. 25.

¹⁹Engelhardt, *Ledroit d'intervention et la Turquie*, Paris, 1880. p. 18.

²⁰Martens, F., *NouveauRecueildestraitésetconventionsconclusparlaRussiaveclespuissancesétrangères*, t. IV, Paris, 1917. p. 438.

Later on, with the Treaty of Berlin from 13th of July 1878, for the first time were proclaimed the principles of religious freedom and equality of the citizens. These obligations referred mainly to the national and religious minority groups in the Ottoman Empire, as well as to the newly recognized national countries on the Balkan, i.e. Romania, Montenegro, Serbia and Bulgaria.²¹

In the obligations stated in the Treaty of Berlin, in Article 4, were set the conditions for the recognizing of the Kingdom of Bulgaria. In this article was envisioned that:

“...In the localities where are intermixed with Bulgarians, Turks, Roumanians, Greeks or other populations, the rights and interests of these populations shall be taken into consideration in the question of the election and elaboration of the organic law.”²²

It is certainly clear that the international protection of the minorities until the end of the World War I was far from efficient and effective. Basically, the decisions which referred to the protection of the minorities served more as an instrument for the European powers through which they could start military and diplomatic initiatives in favor of their momentary interests. Therefore, we can conclude that during the entire XIX century and the first two decades of the XX century the protection of the minorities was essentially ineffective and ultimately failed. From there also comes the non-implementation of the preventive activities which were supposed to condition this protection, and this especially referred to the processes when the minority problems culminated in a full sense of the meaning. This dysfunctionality was mainly due to the failure to incorporate the system of monitoring and sanctioning in the cases when the treaties which envisioned the protection of the minority groups were flagrantly violated.

With the Versailles system the new countries were created, locating a great number of minorities within them. Because of the necessity of resolving of their status and according to the postulate upon which was built the new European order, i.e. the “self determination of the peoples”, the international obligations were set which were guaranteeing the protection of the minorities. The practice of these obligations was generally guaranteed by the League of Nations, establishing the practice with which the minorities got the right to submit petitions to the Council of the League of Nations. This practice, step by step, created the possibility to take into consideration the minority rights in the internal law of the countries which were part of the sphere of the newly established order. Ever since the creation of the Pact of the League of Nations a few attempts were made, mainly by the American president Woodrow Wilson, in order the principles for the religious, language, racial and national minorities to be applied. In his vision, as it was written in the so called Second draft of Wilson, was planned that the following article will be implemented: “The League of Nations will demand from all the new states to be obliged, as a condition to be recognized as independent and autonomous states, that they will respect all the racial or national minorities in their legislature through the securing of a completely equal treatment and securing of the racial and national majority of their population, in both legal and factual sense.”²³

However, as we concluded above, these efforts did not come to fruition, and therefore, in the final draft-version of the text of the Pact did not remain even one paragraph which would specifically mention the protection of the minorities. The powers of the Entente surpassed the universalization of the minority issues in the main document of the League of Nations, because they feared the possibility that if they raise the awareness for the rights of the minority groups, they would lose the control over their own enormous imperial possessions. Because of this, the British leadership advocated for the minority issues to be treated on a secondary level, i.e. over

²¹ Bulgaria was not independent until 1908.

²² For more on the topic, see: The Treaty of Berlin 1878, in: А. Христов, Ј. Донеv, *Македонија во меѓународните договори 1875-1919*, Скопје, 1994, p. 69.

²³ David, Hunter, Miller, *The Drafting of the Covenant*, Vol. 1, Putnam and Sons, New York, 1928. p. 91.

the base of the system of treaties with which the Entente signed the peace pacts with the defeated countries in the World War I.

From the aspect of the international law, the international instruments which covered the protection of the minorities after the war, as we stated earlier, were: a) the special minority treaties signed during the Peace conference in Paris; b) the special chapters contained in the general peace treaties and c) the special chapters contained in the other treaties. As instruments of international protection of the minorities after the war are also taken into consideration: the unilateral declarations sent to the Council of the League of Nations, as well as the especially important international instruments which are the object of our interest in this paper, i.e. the Conventions for protection of the minority rights, which did not fall under the direct protection of the Council of the League of Nations. Besides the Conventions for reciprocal exchange of populations between Greece and Bulgaria and between Greece and Turkey, within this group are also: *The Convention between Poland and Gdańsk for the minorities in the free Gdansk in the free city of Danzig* from 9th of November 1920, and *the Treaty between Poland and Czechoslovakia* from 1925. Aside from the protection of the minorities to the Council of the League of Nations, they could also submit their questions to the Permanent court of international justice. In essence, these were not original solutions because the same can be found in the decisions of the Peace treaty for religion of Augsburg in 1555, in the Peace of Westphalia, the Treaty of Vienna from 1815 as well as in the Treaty of Berlin from 1878.

2. The Treaty of Neuilly

The Treaty of Neuilly has manifested as an official truce between the principal allied powers and the allied powers, and the Bulgarian Empire. With it were projected the territorial concessions of Bulgaria in favor of Greece. Namely, it was regarding the Western Thrace, a region inhabited with Greek population, mixed Slavic population, as well as with Turkish population. This way, the strategic interest of the powers of the Entente was consisted in the preventing Bulgaria to exit on the Dardanelles. For Bulgaria this meant closing of the exit to the Aegean Sea, which was a huge economic barrier. Besides the Western Thrace, Bulgaria with this Treaty was sanctioned also in the regions of South Dobrudja, the western provinces and in the Strumica region, territories which it felt to be an integral part of its geographical wholeness. Aside from the territorial sanctions for Bulgaria according to this Treaty were projected other sanctions as well. They were referring to the limitation of its army to 20.000 people, repeal of the general military mobilization, and in a timeframe of 37 years, Bulgaria was obliged to pay off a military reparation in amount of 2.250.000.000 gold francs, with a yearly interest of 5%.

The obligations to the minorities were regulated in the section IV from Article 49 to Article 57 from the Peace Treaty. With these regulations, Bulgaria was obliged not to obstruct the citizens' rights regarding the right of choice to receive the Bulgarian citizenship. The key point regarding the minorities in this Treaty was the acceptance by Bulgaria of all the decisions which the allied and associated powers suggested regarding the reciprocal exchange of population between Bulgaria and the other Balkan countries.

Therefore, the Article 56 of the general Peace Treaty between the Entente and Bulgaria became the foundation upon which was legalized, and at the same time was implemented, the Convention for voluntary exchange of population between Greece and Bulgaria, which the two

countries signed on 27th of November 1919, in Neuilly-sur-Seine, i.e. the same day when the general Peace treaty was signed with Bulgaria.²⁴

With the Neuilly Peace Treaty was guaranteed to the minorities the right of equality and lawfulness, regardless of gender, language, race and religion. In the corpus of these rights was included the free use of the native language in the education, trade, press, and generally in all the spheres of life. However, if we evaluate the conditions in reality, it is very obvious that with the prescribed peace clauses the “principle” of voluntarism was nothing more than phrase behind which was created the scenario for the forceful expulsion of the unwanted ethnic elements from the Greek state territory.

That way, the main task of the entire Greek state apparatus was aimed towards the extinction and “cleaning” of the conquered and annexed territory regarding the non-Greek ethnic minorities. Thusly Greece, as a subject in the international relations, created a foundation to build upon its own arguments of the ownership, and at the same time of the legitimacy of the new state’s territory acquired with the new territorial layout after the war. On this way, the process of the completion of the state territory has been breached with the declared principles of self-determination of the peoples, and practiced the rule of the principle of force over the principle of law.

3. The Convention for voluntary exchange of population between the Kingdom of Greece and the Bulgarian Empire

On 10th of September 1919, during the meeting of the 49th session of the Committee for new states and protection of minorities in Paris, was published the Annex (B) with which the Committee withdrew its authority regarding the issue of reciprocity of the exchange of the minorities between the previously proposed draft-treaty by the Greek delegate on the Peace Conference, Eleftherios Venizelos. Regarding this issue, the Committee considered that the use of this general conception should not be limited only to the population of the territories projected with the Peace Treaty between allied powers and the Bulgarian Empire, but that it should also be extended to all the inhabitants from all the Balkan countries in case they want to move out and live in some other country. Therefore, the Committee proposed that a mixed commission be formed, which would regulate the emigration, aiming to create a reciprocal stimulation for all the Balkan states equally, for which was also proposed that another special commission should be formed in order this to be conducted fully.

On the 61st session of the Committee for new states and protection of minorities, held on 24th of November 1919, it was concluded that regarding the signing of the Convention for voluntary exchange of population between Greece and Bulgaria, the signatures of the principal allied powers, as well as of the associated powers would not have a crucial meaning.²⁵ Because of that it was agreed that as an Annex to the Convention to be added the formal decision of the High Council that these clauses were accepted by the principle allied and associated powers in accordance to the Article 56 of the Peace Treaty with Bulgaria.

²⁴“On 24th of October 1919, Bulgaria sent a diplomatic note to the Peace Conference, in which expressed its readiness to accept the provisions which had arranged the rights of the minorities on its state territory.”—И. Пржић, *Заштита мањина*, Београд, 1933. p 106.

²⁵*Документи за Македонија*, Едиција документи за Македонија, книга 1, во редакција на проф. д-р Димитар Гелев, Универзитет „Св. Кирил и Методиј“, Правен факултет „Јустинијан Први“— Скопје, Скопје, 2008. p. 455.

Article 56, par. 2

“Bulgaria undertakes to recognize such provisions as the Principal Allied and Associated Powers may consider opportune with respect to the reciprocal and voluntary emigration of persons belonging to racial minorities.”

This decision was accepted by the both Balkan countries. For the Kingdom of Greece this act represented a relief from the unwanted population from its territory, while the Bulgarian Empire made an impression to be ready to play within the newly created rules preferred by the winning powers.²⁶ Through the fulfillment of the Bulgarian neutrality, the Bulgarian Empire was rebuilding its international respect, expecting that after a certain period it should be able to launch its diplomatic plan to open the question for revision of the Neuilly Peace Treaty.

The Convention for voluntary exchange of population between the Kingdom of Greece and the Bulgarian Empire was signed at the same time with the Neuilly Peace Treaty between principle allied and associated powers and Bulgaria, on 27th of November 1919, in Neuilly-sur-Seine. With it was set the voluntary emigration of the ethnic, religious and linguistic minority groups in Greece and Bulgaria, without these minorities being named in the document.

The Committee for new states during the process of observation of the Treaty for reciprocal emigration sent an invitation to the government of the Kingdom of SCS to participate in the same Treaty.²⁷ However, with the letter of the president of the Serbian Delegation Nikola Pasic from 8th of November 1919, the delegation of SCS rejected its participation in this act. Therefore, the Committee, presiding with the 59th session on 13th of November 1919, brought a decision not to insist any further.²⁸

The Convention for exchange of population entered into force on 9th of August 1920. The exchange of population with this act was turned into a forceful eviction which encompassed Thrace as well, to which was not referring at the beginning. This Convention has covered the heavy demographic picture, especially in the part which was annexed by Greece, i.e. in Aegean Macedonia. In fact, on the account of the Convention, throughout the entire period between the two world wars, the Kingdom of Greece performed pressure for eviction of the Macedonians from the Aegean part.²⁹

From the aspect of its structure, the Convention was constructed by 16 Articles and in it were contained the directions for the method of conduction of the reciprocal exchange, as well as the conditions under which the exchange was to be executed.

In Article 1 from the Convention, the agreed parties recognized the rights of the subjects of the ethnic minorities “*by the religion or by the language*” to freely move out from their territories. Along with that, the agreed parties were obliged to conduct the emigration of these minorities without making any selections or creating of any other kind of obstacles in the process of their practice of the right to emigrate.

Regarding the age limit of the emigrants, in the Convention was set that:

²⁶ “Bulgaria, same as Hungary, firstly demanded that on the disputable territories should be held a plebiscite through which it hoped to decrease the losses in the territorial sense. However, the allies did not take this demand in consideration because during the drawing of the new borders they were guided more from the strategic, than from the ethnic principles.” – L. Stavrianos, *Balkan posle 1453*, Beograd, 2005. p. 551.

²⁷ The Kingdom of Greece offered the plan for exchange of population also to the Kingdom of SCS because it wanted to be rid of the entire Slavic population as much as it is possible; however, SCS declined this proposition.

²⁸ X. Полјански – Андонов, *Велика Британија и македонското прашање на Париската мировна конференција во 1919 година*, Архив на Македонија, Скопје, 1973. p. 47.

²⁹ *Историја на македонскиот народ*, том 4, ИНИ, Скопје, 2000. p. 204.

(Article 4)

“The right of voluntary emigration belongs to every person over 18 years of age. It shall be exercisable during a period of two years from the date of constitution of the mixed commission provided for in Article 8, by means of a declaration before that commission or before its representatives. A declaration of intention to emigrate on the part of a husband shall imply a declaration by his wife; a declaration of intention to emigrate on the part of parents or guardians shall imply a declaration by their children or wards under 18 years of age.”³⁰

Further on, in the Article 5 of the Convention was declared that in the moment when the emigrants would leave the country in which they lived by then, automatically their right of citizenship was deprived and they immediately had the right to acquire the citizenship of the country in which they emigrated, from the moment of arriving on its territory. Also, these people with the Convention were allowed to bring along with them all the moving properties without being obliged to pay taxes, neither at the exit nor at the entrance into the chosen country.

With the Article 8 of the Convention for voluntary exchange of population between Greece and Bulgaria it was set that in a timeframe of three months should be formed a Mixed commission in whose composition should enter one of each members named by every interested agreed party, and in reciprocity also equal number of members of the other nations which were to be delegated by the Council of the League of Nations. From these delegates (referring to the delegated members by the Council) was to be elected the president which would preside with the commission.

The task of the mixed commission as was to perform supervision of the paying off of the real estate which belonged to the emigrants, and it had jurisdiction to perform revision of the same real estate as well. After the performing of the liquidity of these real estates, it was projected that the Government to the emigrants from where was performed the liquidation, under conditions set by the Commission, the value of these properties should be carried out before the Commission, which was obliged to refund it to their owners. The Commission therefore had a jurisdiction to give an advance to the emigrants according to the amount of the evaluated price of their entire real estates. “The Article 8 envisioned that in the timeframe of three months from the entrance into force of the Convention of the League of Nations will be formed a commission which will be assigned to control and facilitate the immigration and to liquidate the external possessions of the migrants. The Commission was obliged to set the method of the moving out of the estates. The Commission had a complete authority to adopt solutions by majority votes. With the Article 10 was planned that the mixed commission shall have the right even to establish the value of the estate after the hearing of the owners. The Government of the country, after the payment of the value, would become the owner of the estate.”³¹

Because of the great waves of refugees from the period of the war even since the time of the Balkan wars, the Mixed commission was also authorized to pay off the properties to the refugees which emigrated during the wars into Bulgaria or into Greece, and at first were not covered by the focus of the Committee for new states and protection of minorities when was discussed the plan for reciprocal exchange of population in Paris. Because of that, the legal effect of this Convention had an economic use for the minority groups which were already outside of their native territory. Regarding this issues, the Mixed commission brought a decision to cover the people which emigrated in the previous 20 years and with that it greatly complicated its work,

³⁰Македонија во меѓународните договори, I, (1913-1940), Државен Архив на Република Македонија, Скопје, 2006. стр. 185.

³¹О. Ивановски, З. Тодоровски, *Македонското прашање во бугарскиот парламент 1918-1941*, Скопје, 2008. стр. 74 – 75.

extending the benefices of the Convention also to the people which from a legal standpoint, were still citizens of the Ottoman Empire. However, the voluntary exchange of population designed with this Convention, did not fulfill the goal of its task. In fact, during the period until June 1923 only 197 families from the Kingdom of Greece voluntarily moved into the Bulgarian Empire. On the other side, around 166 families in the same period of time migrated from the Bulgarian Empire into the Kingdom of Greece. The Greek xenophobia, especially in Aegean Macedonia, which after the annexation by the Kingdom of Greece was renamed into the region of North Greece³², forcefully conditioned in the following period of time the “voluntary” emigration of the Macedonians from their native land into the Bulgarian Empire.³³

Compared to the Greek emigrants who unsatisfied by the new conditions, after the Acts for the agrarian reform have been adopted in Bulgaria in 1920/21, in major account moved into Greece, the Macedonians – especially those who lived near the border with the Kingdom of Yugoslavia, decided not to emigrate.

4. Conclusions

It is evident that with these international instruments on the international conference in Paris in 1919 was made a more serious, although unsuccessful, attempt for protection of the minorities from the possible maltreatments and injustices of any kind. In fact, we can freely conclude that the goal of establishing the corpus minority issues within the Versailles system was not consisted in the intention to resolve the minority issues, but to construct proper methods which would prompt an intervention. This approach, from both political and legal, and of course from psychological aspect as well, represented a very sensitive area which often was led into collision with the individual interests of the countries, and at the same time threatened to distort the already established international relations. It is very obvious that the system of minority issues after the war was limited exceptionally to the weaker countries, and especially treated those countries which were defeated in the same war. In no existing sense this system could be implemented in the internal law of all the states-members of the League of Nations. Therefore, the international problematization of the issues from the minority corpus slipping through its historical progress, entering the phase when they culminated in the concentration camps, or, in the slightly better version, in the emigration in the countries of the new world.

³² “The region was divided on three general directions: one for the central part of Aegean Macedonia with its headquarters in Salonica and with the districts: Salonica, Halkidiki, Kukush, Voden and Ber; second for the eastern part of Aegean Macedonia with its center in Kavala, and in it entered: Serres, Drama and Kavala district; in the town of Kozani was found the third direction for the western part of Aegean Macedonia, with the districts: Koznai, Lerin and Kostur.” See more in: *Историја на Македонскиот народ*, том 4, ИНИ, Скопје, p. 202.

³³ “In that sense, within the Bulgarian parliament occurred a harsh discussion among the members. The convention was evaluated as extremely negative and harmful for Bulgaria... As most responsible was held Alexander Stamboliski who signed the convention. The signing of the same was considered to be a great mistake of the Bulgarian foreign politics. With it to Greece was enabled the right of a violent eviction of “all the Bulgarians” who remained on the Greek territory, without the possibility to declare the right to live where they were born. This agreement excluded the right to return of the refugees from one or another reason... The Members of the parliament reacted to the unreal treatment in the convention which was supposed to be the obstacle for the signing of the same by the Bulgarian part, because the Greek government imposed another condition to Bulgaria for settlement of the expenses of the exiled “from their hearths”, which was unacceptable.” - Ивановски, Тодоровски, *Македонското прашање во бугарскиот парламент...* (q.w.), p. 7.

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